Sensing subjectivity: Children’s semantic & epistemological development

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Background

• Word meanings may be subjective, posing a challenge for semantic compositionality
• Subjective words permit faultless disagreement

→ How does the adult intuition that subjective disagreements are faultless develop?

Faultless disagreement could arise when:
• Speakers have different personal tastes
• A predicate is inherently vague
• Speakers have had different experiences, thus different standards

→ Do adults and children consider a speaker’s opinion and experience when interpreting different adjectives?
• 4-year-olds understand that tall indicates the high end of a specific distribution
• Young children may be naive realists

Faultless disagreement not permitted?

Stimuli & Method

Puppets are independently exposed to distinct (see above) or identical distributions of novel objects, varying along two dimensions (e.g., height and spottedness), then disagree about a novel, intermediate object.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trial Type</th>
<th>Novel Object</th>
<th>Disagreements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training Trials</td>
<td>fap</td>
<td>white/black, sparkly/big</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>zav</td>
<td>blue/red, shiny/big</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Trials</td>
<td>pimmet</td>
<td>spotted, tall, pretty</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pimmet (plain)</td>
<td>pretty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dax</td>
<td>striped, big, boring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method, cont.

Faultless disagreement is ‘could be right’ for both characters

Qualitative responses coded into following categories:

- speaker property
- distribution exposure
- speaker opinion
- user familiarity
- independence
- intransitive
- metalinguistic

Faultless disagreement = ‘could be right’ for both characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Questions</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Following each ascription:</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRITIC: QUESTION: Zoe said, “That's a tall pimwit,” was she wrong, or could she be right?</td>
<td>UTTERANCE EXPLANATION: Why? For each object, in a post-test:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONAL PERCEPTION: Is this pimwit tall?</td>
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</tbody>
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Are faultless disagreement judgments modulated by speakers’ experience?

→ Characters exposed to distinct or identical distributions

Participants: 59 adults (DISTINCT: 25 adults, 18 women, M = 21 yrs, SD = 1.7 yrs; IDENTICAL: 34 adults, 26 women, M = 20 yrs, SD = 3.5 yrs)

Faultless Disagreement by Trial & Condition

Faultless Disagreement by Adj & Age

Study 2: Children

Do children permit faultless disagreement for subjective adjectives, and relative adjectives when characters have been exposed to distinct distributions?

Participants: 50 children, 4 - 6.11 (M = 5.4, SD = 8.6 mos)

Faultless Disagreement by Trial & Age

Faultless Disagreement by Adj & Age

Do they understand that different information sources are relevant for different adjectives?

Study 2, cont.

Children do not permit faultless disagreement for pretty, & despite age-related increases in judgments for tall, are still well below adult rates.

Study 2, cont.

Children do not permit faultless disagreement for pretty, & despite age-related increases in judgments for tall, are still well below adult rates.

- DISTINCT

How Reference to Information Types Changes over Time

- pretty

Summary & Future Directions

• Adults permit faultless disagreement for many reasons: distribution exposure, vageness, and speaker opinion
• Children reluctant to make faultless disagreement judgments, but exhibit increasing sensitivity to distribution exposure and speaker opinion

Future directions

• Can children use consensus information or other cues to first identify subjective adjectives?
• Is a speaker’s competence evaluated differently for ‘incorrect uses’ of absolute vs. relative/subjective adjectives?
• How does children’s understanding of linguistic subjectivity relate to their epistemological development?

References